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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001079

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO FIELDS SOFTBALLS FROM RUSSIAN MEDIA,
HITS FOULS IN PROCESS

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4 (d).

Summary

11. (C) In an extensively covered lengthy press conference with selected visiting Russian journalists, President Lukashenko laid all the blame for the latest delay in Belarusian-Russian integration at the doorstep of the Kremlin. On the other hand, he claimed an affinity for Russia, told the audience Belarusians would defend Russia with their lives, and yet again trumpeted Belarus' continued economic successes. While Lukashenko presented the press conference as a means to inform the Russian public about Belarus, most likely he hoped to once again demonstrate to the Kremlin that he is a tough bargaining partner when pushed. End summary.

Russian Press Conference for Local Consumption

12. (C) On September 29, an animated President Lukashenko took questions for over three hours from a group of over 80 Russian journalists completing a visit to Belarus. Most of the journalists work for regional press in Russia. In his opening statement, Lukashenko presented the press conference as a means to tell the Russian public in the regions the "objective" truth in order to overcome "distorted" information Lukashenko attributed to the Belarusian opposition politicians and "their Western sponsors." Lukashenko clearly hoped to reach his own subjects as well judging by the extensive local coverage. The press conference was broadcast live on Belarusian radio, rebroadcast almost in its entirety that evening, and highlights were carried on the major weekly news review October 1. State press all carried excerpts in their October 2 editions.

I'm Not Against Russia - Lots of My Friends are Russians

13. (C) Lukashenko claimed he earnestly wished to carry forward with a referendum on the Union State with Russia, but was thwarted by unnamed "elites" and people within the Kremlin. The president said he insisted on full implementation of the Union Treaty, while Russia sought to weaken its provisions.

14. (C) Stating he did not want to be the first (sic) and last president of Belarus, Lukashenko rejected any notion that Belarus should become part of the Russian Federation. Lukashenko suggested the end of Belarusian independence would incite a civil war "worse than Chechnya." Claiming Western governments paid protesters to incite violence after the March elections, Lukashenko said armed groups from "camps" in Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltics, Poland and even the Volga region would enter Belarus to fight in the event of the end

of Belarusian independence.

¶15. (C) Lukashenko liberally sprinkled his thinly veiled attacks on the Russian leadership's commitment to the Union State with statements about the close relationship between the Russian and Belarusian peoples. In his most emotional appeal he told reporters Belarusians "will die for Russia" if forces ever invade from the West.

The IMF Hates Us because We're so Good

¶16. (C) Lukashenko used the occasion to thumb his nose at liberal economists, noting Belarus' continued economic growth and rising wages. The president said the IMF has "recognized the Belarusian model"; he compared Belarus' success to China's. He downplayed concerns the economy depended on energy subsidies from Russia, claiming only one percent of GDP resulted from below-market gas prices. (Note: Marina Bakanova of the World Bank confirmed at a presentation to diplomats October 2 that in 2005 Russian energy subsidies accounted for over ten percent of Belarusian GDP; some sources put the figure even higher than that. End note.) He indicated no willingness to compromise on the sale of the state gas transport monopoly Beltransgaz.

Local Reaction: Messages for Everyone

¶17. (C) Igor Shinkarik, Deputy for the United Civic Party (UCP), told Poloff he did not see much new in the speech. He referred to an article on the party's website characterizing the performance as typical Lukashenko in which the president makes many contradictory statements so all his supporters can find something they like. Bringing in uncritical "foreign"

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reporters gives Lukashenko a chance to trot out the same old arguments to an audience that might report them as if they were new. Valeriy Ukhlanov of the Belarusian Communist Party largely agreed with this assessment, telling Poloff the audience probably heard what they wanted.

¶18. (C) Aleksey Korol, Deputy for the Belarusian Social Democratic Party - Gramada described the press conference as a means for Lukashenko to demonstrate his indispensability to both the Russian public and the West. Lukashenko wanted the Russian public to believe Russia and Belarus are interdependent, counteracting the common assumption Belarus depends on Russia. According to Korol, Lukashenko hopes the West will take away from the press conference that Putin must rely on Lukashenko to accomplish anything in Belarus. That is, Lukashenko's ability to criticize the Kremlin before Russian journalists shows Putin's limited influence over Lukashenko, and the West should not hope for Putin to push for Lukashenko's ouster anytime soon.

Comment: Lukashenko Postures Before Final Gas Negotiations

¶19. (C) Lukashenko timed the press conference for the final day during which a joint referendum on the Union State could be called legally in 2006, and less than three weeks before Putin is due to attend a CIS summit in Minsk. Placing all the blame for the latest annual failure to move forward on the Union State on Russia helps inoculate him from criticism at home. Given the timing of the press conference, it is likely the main target audience was the Kremlin.

¶10. (C) Comment continued: It is always debatable how much Lukashenko really believes his own rhetoric. In any case, his performance was largely believable. Lukashenko genuinely seemed resolutely against caving in to Russian pressure on Beltransgaz. The question remains whether Moscow buys into the performance, objects to Lukashenko's ravings, or thinks it's all an act; a good indicator will be Putin's next

interaction with Belarus' dictator later this month in Minsk.
Stewart